

Allen Quip Provokes Outrage, Apology

Name Insults Webb Volunteer

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RICHMOND, Aug. 14 -- Virginia Sen. George Allen (R) apologized Monday for what his opponent's campaign said were demeaning and insensitive comments the senator made to a 20-year-old volunteer of Indian descent.

At a campaign rally in southwest Virginia on Friday, Allen repeatedly called a volunteer for Democrat James Webb "macaca." During the speech in Breaks, near the Kentucky border, Allen began by saying that he was "going to run this campaign on positive, constructive ideas" and then pointed at S.R. Sidarth in the crowd.

"This fellow here, over here with the yellow shirt, macaca, or whatever his name is. He's with my opponent. He's following us around everywhere. And it's just great," Allen said, as his supporters began to laugh. After saying that Webb was raising money in California with a "bunch of Hollywood movie moguls," Allen said, "Let's give a welcome to macaca, here. Welcome to America and the real world of Virginia." Allen then began talking about the "war on terror."

Depending on how it is spelled, the word *macaca* could mean either a monkey that inhabits the Eastern Hemisphere or a town in South Africa. In some European cultures, macaca is also considered a racial slur against African immigrants, according to several Web sites that track ethnic slurs.

"The kid has a name," Webb communications director Kristian Denny Todd said of Sidarth, a Virginia native who was born in Fairfax County. "This is trying to demean him, to minimize him as a person."

Todd added that the use of macaca, whatever it means, and the reference welcoming Sidarth to America were clearly intended to make him uncomfortable.

Reached Monday evening, Allen said that the word had no derogatory meaning for him and that he was sorry. "I would never want to demean him as an individual. I do apologize if he's offended by that. That was no way the point."

Asked what macaca means, Allen said: "I don't know what it means." He said the word sounds similar to "mohawk," a term that his campaign staff had nicknamed Sidarth because of his haircut. Sidarth said his hairstyle is a mullet -- tight on top, long in the back.

Allen said that by the comment welcoming him to America, he meant: "Just to the real world. Get outside the Beltway and get to the real world."

But the apology, which came hours after Allen's campaign manager dismissed the issue with an expletive and insisted the senator has "nothing to apologize for," did little to mollify Webb's campaign or Sidarth, who said he suspects Allen singled him out because he was the only nonwhite face among about 100 Republican supporters.

"I think he was doing it because he could, and I was the only person of color there, and it was useful for him in inciting his audience," said Sidarth, who videotaped the event for the Webb campaign. "I was annoyed he would use my race in a political context."

Told of Allen's apology, Todd added, "I hope Allen realizes that Virginians come in all colors."

Allen is running for a second term in the Senate while planning a possible presidential bid in 2008. Webb, a Vietnam war hero and former Navy secretary under President Ronald Reagan, is working to derail those plans with an underfunded campaign based principally on Webb's early opposition to the war in Iraq.

Virginia Commonwealth University politics professor Robert Holsworth called Allen's comments a gaffe that probably wouldn't change the Senate race but could hurt his presidential ambitions.

"This doesn't turn the race around at all," Holsworth said. "But for a guy running for president, this is likely to be regularly aired this year and maybe beyond."

House Majority Leader H. Morgan Griffith (R-Salem), who represents southwest Virginia, said the Webb campaign is just "grabbing for stuff" to gain traction against Allen. Griffith said he doubts anyone at the rally even picked up on Allen's use of the word macaca.

"Not many people in southwest Virginia would think it is derogatory," Griffith said. "I didn't have a clue what it meant, and I doubt Allen did, either."

Sidarth, who is entering his fourth year at the University of Virginia and is an active Democrat, had been assigned to trail Allen with a video camera to document his travels and speeches for Webb, a common campaign tactic.

Steve Mukherjee, a spokesman for the Washington chapter of the Association of Indians in America, said Allen's comments were "hurtful," and he chided the senator for not being more sensitive.

"The world is so volatile and so delicate," Mukherjee said. "You have to be careful what you say and how you say it. The U.S. is no longer black and white."

Asked what macaca means, Mukherjee said: "What it means, I don't know. But it's going to cause him some grief."

It's not the first time Allen has confronted charges of insensitivity to race or ethnicity from minority leaders and longtime political opponents.

Before he ran for governor in 1993, Allen was criticized for keeping a Confederate flag in a cabin near his Charlottesville home, part of a collection of flags, he has said. He stirred controversy as governor by issuing a proclamation noting the South's celebration of Confederate History Month without mentioning slavery.

This year, the New Republic magazine published a photo of Allen wearing a Confederate flag on his lapel during high school.

"It wasn't a racial statement; it was a statement about his rebellious nature," said John Reid, Allen's communications director.

Allen campaign manager Dick Wadhams also went on the offensive, accusing Webb of mailing an anti-Semitic flier during his primary this year that contained a caricature of Webb's Jewish opponent.

Todd said Wadhams is trying to change the subject. "The flier was never meant to be anti-Semitic," she said. "That was a charge levied by our opponent at the time to drive voters away from Jim Webb, much like Allen's trying to do today."